



Fact Sheet

You are here: [DOH Home](#) » [Topics A-Z](#) » Hepatitis C

[Search](#) | [Employees](#)

Hepatitis C

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis C virus. Many persons who have hepatitis C have no symptoms. Symptoms may include fever, lack of energy, nausea, vomiting, abdominal discomfort and jaundice (yellow color to the whites of the eyes or skin and darkening of urine). Most infected persons develop chronic, long-term hepatitis C (carrier) and can spread the infection. Cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) and liver failure are serious risks with this disease, but may take decades to develop.

How common is it?

It is estimated that almost 4 million persons in the U.S. are infected with hepatitis C. It accounts for most of the hepatitis cases that used to be referred to as non-A, non-B hepatitis. Hepatitis C is the leading cause for liver transplantation and accounts for nearly 8,000-10,000 deaths each year in the U.S.

How is it spread?

The virus is spread mainly by direct contact with the blood from an infected person. About 80% of people who have ever injected street drugs and/or shared injection drug equipment are infected with hepatitis C. It can also be spread when health care workers are exposed to an infected person's blood, or through organ transplants or blood transfusions, especially those received prior to the development of a hepatitis C test in the early 1990s. Infected mothers can pass the virus to their babies but this is thought to occur at a low rate and accounts for about 5% of cases in the United States. The risk of sexual transmission also appears to be low, accounting for about 5% of cases in this country. Other persons at risk include kidney dialysis patients.

Hepatitis C is not spread by sneezing, coughing, hugging, sharing eating utensils or drinking glasses, or other casual contact. It is not spread by food or water.

How high is the risk of getting hepatitis C through a blood transfusion?

Thanks to the tests developed for hepatitis C, the risk is now very low. Donated blood has been routinely tested for hepatitis C since the early 1990s.

How soon do symptoms occur?

Many people with hepatitis C have no symptoms. If symptoms occur, they do so an average of six to seven weeks after exposure but may occur two weeks to six months after exposure.

When and for how long is a person able to spread hepatitis C?

Some people carry the virus in their blood for the rest of their lives. Acute hepatitis C infection may be followed by recovery but usually becomes chronic and causes symptoms for years. An infected person with no symptoms can still spread hepatitis C to others.

Is there a vaccine available?

Not yet. While there are vaccines for both hepatitis A and B, they do not provide protection against hepatitis C. There is no vaccine for hepatitis C because the virus changes easily, making it very difficult to develop an effective vaccine.

What is the treatment for hepatitis C infection?

The Food and Drug Administration has approved drugs for treating some persons with chronic hepatitis C. Unfortunately, treatment does not help all persons who have hepatitis C.

A person with hepatitis C should never drink alcohol because it may cause further damage to the liver. Check with your health care provider about tests, regular monitoring, and vaccination for other forms of hepatitis such as hepatitis A and B. Also, consult with your health care provider about all medications you are taking, including nonprescription and herbal remedies, to make sure they do not affect the liver.

Who should be tested for hepatitis C?

- Persons who ever injected illegal drugs, including those who injected once or a few times many years ago and don't consider themselves drug users.
- Persons who received clotting factor concentrates produced before 1987.
- Persons who were ever on long-term kidney dialysis.
- Persons with persistently abnormal alanine aminotransferase levels (test of liver's function).
- Persons who were notified that they received blood from a donor who later tested positive for hepatitis C.
- Persons who received a transfusion of blood or blood components before July 1992.
- Persons who received an organ transplant before July 1992.
- Healthcare, emergency medical, and public safety workers after needle sticks, or mucosal exposures to blood infected with hepatitis C virus.
- Children born to mothers infected with hepatitis C.

If I have hepatitis C, how can I avoid spreading it to others?

- Do not share any needles or other drug equipment.
- Do not donate blood or organs.
- Do not share razors, toothbrushes, nail care devices, or any other personal items that might have your blood on them.
- Let health care professionals who may be exposed to your blood know that you have hepatitis C.
- Although sexual transmission appears to be low, inform your sexual partner that you have hepatitis C and consider using latex condoms and barriers.
- Cover cuts or open sores on your skin.

Where can I get more information?

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For more information call Communicable Disease Epidemiology at (206) 418-5500 or toll-free 877-539-4344 or Infectious Disease and Reproductive Health at 360-236-3440, or the HIV/AIDS Hotline 800-272-2437.

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